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RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 6089
RUEHTN/AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN PRIORITY 0038
RUEHSA/AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG PRIORITY 0012
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JEDDAH 000086

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RIYADH, PLEASE PASS TO DHARAHAN; DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARPI;
PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: ETRD IR KISL NNNP PARM PREL SA SF

SUBJECT: NEW SOUTH AFRICAN CONSUL GENERAL SPEAKS OF TRADE,
HAJJIS, OIC, AND IRAN

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller, for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: At an introductory meeting on January 29, new South African Consul General Mahdi Basadien described his mission to promote South African trade, particularly in mining and defense. His post also supports some 27,000 South Africans who travel to Saudi Arabia each year on pilgrimage. His consulate will host a security evaluation team in February and has asked for a briefing from the Consulate General's RSO and ACS officers. He reported that South Africa's application for observer status at the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is being delayed by Arab fears that other African states will insist on observer status and obtain access to OIC funding agencies. Basadien also commented on the Iranian election and efforts to limit Ahmadinejad's authority. In the event of a UN vote on sanctions against Iran, Basadien believed that South Africa would be inclined to abstain. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On January 29, newly arrived South African Consul General Mahdi Basadien visited the Consul General and Pol/Econ Chief for an introductory meeting. Basadien appears to be in his early forties. He entered the South African Foreign Ministry in 1994 and is a Middle East specialist. He has served in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and completed a four-year tour as Political Counselor in Iran in December 2005, immediately before coming to Jeddah.

SOUTH AFRICAN CONSULATE DEALS WITH TRADE AND PILGRIMS

¶3. (C) The South African Consulate General in Jeddah is a small post, consisting of the Consul General and two other officers. The Consul General described his goals in Jeddah as promoting trade and supporting South African citizens traveling to Saudi Arabia for Hajj or Umrah.

TRADE PROSPECTS

¶4. (C) South Africa is attracted to the booming Saudi economy, but believes that it has failed to penetrate the market satisfactorily. The Consul admitted that South Africa's growing, but relatively small "Black Power" enterprises have not found it easy to compete in the Saudi economy. He also revealed that at least in the Arab World,

the admiration for Nelson Mandela has not transformed to admiration for the nation of South Africa. In fact, he has observed a pronounced anti-African prejudice in Saudi society. The CG concurred, describing incidents when accompanying Saudis have disparaged Africans to her as being primitive and the cause of crime and disease in the Kingdom. Basadien said his government has identified mining and the defense sector as two areas where they could make inroads, both sectors being relatively highly developed in South Africa.

HAJJ AND UMRAH PILGRIMS OCCUPY CONSULATE FOR MUCH OF THE YEAR

¶15. (C) Providing support for Muslim pilgrims is a major task for the Consulate. Although only some 2% of the South African population is Muslim, the South African government endorses pilgrimage and provides support. Preparations for the Hajj occupy the Consulate for about three months every year. South Africa has a quota of 2,000 hajjis per year, but in recent years an average of 7,500 South Africans have actually made the pilgrimage. Obtaining a waiver every year from the Hajj Ministry for the additional 5,500 pilgrims is one of the Consulate's major initiatives with the KSA. During the remainder of the year approximately 20,000 South African's come to KSA for Umrah.

IN JEDDAH SECURITY IS ALWAYS A CONSIDERATION

¶16. (C) In common with all diplomats in Jeddah, Basadien is concerned about post security and the safety of his country's approximately 9,000 nationals, in the event of a crisis. He informed the CG that on February 6, a South African team will arrive in Jeddah to evaluate the security environment and

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emergency plans for the evacuation of South Africans. He requested a briefing from the American Consulate General on these subjects. The CG agreed that Consulate RSO and ACS officers will meet the team.

SOUTH AFRICA IN THE OIC?

¶17. (C) Basadien reported that South Africa's application for observer status at the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) is progressing well, but some obstacles remain. Curiously, there is apparently little opposition to South Africa gaining observer status, but some Arab states object to setting a precedent which may lead to other African states gaining observer status. This, they fear, would give many poor states access to Islamic financial institutions. South Africa's strong economy apparently insulates it from the charge that it would impose on Islamic finances.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR MEMBERSHIP IN OIC ARE INCONSISTENT

¶18. (C) There ensued a discussion on exactly what qualified a country for membership or observer status in the OIC. Formally, members are supposed to be majority Muslim states and have a Muslim or Islamic government. However, South Africa's population is only 2% Muslim and it has a secular government. Turkey, another secular state, and Lebanon, with its complex multi-sectarian governmental structure, are members. India, however, although possessing the second largest Muslim population of any country, will not be allowed observer status, and has historically been viewed as exhibiting an anti-Islamic outlook. According to Basadien, South Africa is acceptable because of the historical links forged during the Apartheid struggle when the Islamic organization was an early supporter. Russia, which has applied for observer status, in Basadien's view, will not be accorded observer status.

SOUTH AFRICAN VIEWS ON IRAN

¶19. (C) Since the new Consul General just left Iran after an extended residence, Pol/Econ Chief asked him to share his

views on Iran, President Ahmadinejad, and South Africa's position on sanctions. His first observation was that the general population of Iran remains far more progressive than the government. Unfortunately the progressive elements have not been able to break the conservatives' hold on political power. In regards to the election, according to Basadien, there was no attractive candidate. An early candidate was thought to be using his relationship with powerful political elements to grab office and then use it to enrich himself. Consequently, with the support of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Ahmadinejad was put forward as a compromise candidate. Basadien had met Ahmadinejad once, but stated on the opinion of contacts that Ahmadinejad is expressing his own prejudices and is viewed as a person who cannot be controlled. There is consternation in the Iranian government about his actions, but he has the "total" support of the IRGC and the rest of the leadership does not want to reveal fractures in the government to the public or outside world. However, some efforts are being made to circumscribe his power. Basadien has been told that Khamenei quietly removed certain governmental powers from the Presidency.

SOUTH AFRICA WORRIED ABOUT CALL FOR SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN

¶10. (C) In discussing the possibility that Iran's efforts to enrich nuclear materials could lead to a vote for sanctions against Iran in the United Nations, Basadien admitted that South Africa is very apprehensive that sanctions would injury its economy. South Africa, he reminded Pol/Econ Chief, obtains about one-third of its oil supplies from Iran, and sanctions would represent a serious threat to the economy. When pressed about South Africa's position, Basadien said their position would be influenced by the debate preceding the vote and especially provisions made to buffer oil-dependent economies from oil starvation. When it ultimately came to a vote, solely in his person opinion, he suspected that South Africa would abstain.

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